

Quality Learning Environment

By investing in quality learning environments, youth programs are well poised for effectively supporting social and emotional skill development. This activity explores how elements of the Youth Program Quality Pyramid align with supporting social and emotional skills.

Why This Matters

- A high quality youth program provides the setting and experiences conducive to developing many positive outcomes, including positive social and emotional skills and beliefs.
- Improving youth program quality is essentially about creating better processes and conditions for learning to occur, including the learning environment for SEL.
- Program staff play a key role in cultivating the right environment for growing social and emotional skills and creating strategies for change.

Getting Started

- Read the issue brief *[The Relationship between Youth Program Quality and Social & Emotional Learning](#)*, especially pages 5-6 that outline which SEL skills are supported by each of the program quality domains.
- This activity will be easiest to use for staff groups that are familiar with the Weikart Center's Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) tool (see the issue brief and the Quality Indicators Worksheet).
- While the Safe Environment domain of the YPQA tool is fundamental to youth program quality and it is an important domain to address in quality learning environments, this activity focuses on the other domains of the pyramid.
- Materials: Copies of Quality Indicators Worksheet for each person
- Time: 45 minutes

How To Use It

- 1) Before a staff meeting, share copies of the Issues Brief for staff to read. Ask them to come to the meeting with 1-2 highlights from the issue brief.
- 2) Start the staff meeting asking for general reactions to the issue brief. Take at least 5-6 responses to get the conversation started.
- 3) Next: provide 10-15 minutes for staff to read and fill out the Quality Indicators Worksheet. Specifically fill in the sentences in each of the three text boxes.
- 4) Open up discussion (approximately 20-30 minutes) for people to share how they responded to the SEL Skill box for each of the domains:
 - Start with Supportive Environment. Share ways that your program does this well. Discuss which SEL skills young people can learn and apply in a supportive environment (e.g., critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, emotion management).
 - Move on to Interaction. Share ways that your program does this well. Discuss which SEL skills young people can learn and apply when Interaction is present (e.g., teamwork, empathy, responsibility).
 - Finally, look at Engagement. Share ways that your program does this well. Discuss which SEL skills young people can learn and apply when Engagement is present (e.g., goal-setting, decision-making, planning, perseverance).
- 5) Based on the input, take time as a group to set 2-3 goals for strategies that bring an SEL lens to the quality learning environment and intentionally support social and emotional skill development. Fill these in at the bottom of the Worksheet. For example, Reflection can foster the SEL skill of self-awareness. Connect quality and SEL skills as reflection time is designed into the program. How can you set a goal to build reflection into each day of programming?
- 6) Post the goals that are decided and check in at the next staff meeting to discuss whether staff believe they are making progress toward the goal.

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Take It Further

- Review the SEL/Quality crosswalk on page 209 of the field guide [Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices in Social & Emotional Learning](#). This includes Youth Program Quality Assessment domains (YPQA) and eight SEL domains (emotion management, empathy, teamwork, responsibility, initiative, problem-solving).
- The guide [Measuring Quality: Assessment Tools to Evaluate Your Social-Emotional Learning Practices](#) helps identify tools to assess the quality of staff practices in relation to SEL (safe and supportive environment; active and engaged learning; skill building; youth voice and leadership; diversity, access, and equity).

Tool: Quality Indicators Worksheet

The Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality Pyramid outlines four domains of a quality learning environment (Safe Environment, Supportive Environment, Interaction, and Engagement) with key indicators listed for each.

Circle the indicator descriptions below under each domain that your program does well. Consider how SEL is supported in supportive environments with high levels of interaction and engagement. Use the box under each domain to pick a focus on quality and tie it to a specific SEL skill.



Supportive Environment

In programs that provide a supportive environment, youth feel welcome and engaged, they are encouraged to develop new skills and conflict is constructively reframed.

- **Warm Welcome** (youth are greeted, program leader uses warm/respectful language, and friendly gestures)
- **Session Flow** (session starts on time, materials and supplies ready, enough supplies, all activities explained clearly, appropriate amount of time for activities)
- **Active Engagement** (youth engage with materials, improve a skill, balance concrete and abstract, activities lead to tangible products or performances, difficult tasks broken into smaller steps)
- **Skill Building** (specific learning or skill focus stated, try new skills or higher level of performance, program leader models skills, difficult task broken into smaller steps, encouragement or support provided to struggling youth)
- **Encouragement** (program leader support youth with specific/non-evaluative language, frequent use of open ended questions, program leader actively involved with youth)
- **Reframing Conflict** (program leader approaches conflict calmly, program leader seeks youth input, program leader follows up with youth after a conflict, address bullying)

If _____ is present, youth can learn _____ .
 (Supportive Environment indicator) (SEL skill)

Tool: Quality Indicators Worksheet

Interaction

High quality interaction happens when youth are able to collaborate effectively; learn, then practice leadership skills; and share control and ideas.

- **Belonging** (youth provided structured 'get to know you' opportunities, youth identify with program offering, program leader provides structured opportunities to recognize youth)
- **Collaboration** (program leader provides opportunities for youth to work collaboratively, activities allow for interdependent roles, youth work toward shared goals)
- **Leadership** (youth participate in large & small group conversation, youth assigned leadership roles)
- **Adult Partners** (program leader shares control with youth, program leader talks with youth about their lives outside the program)

If _____ is present, youth can learn _____ .
(Interaction indicator) *(SEL skill)*

Engagement

Engagement refers to a specific set of activities: planning, choice, and reflection. Programs with high levels of engagement give youth opportunities to set goals, make choices and plans, and reflect on what they've done.

- **Planning** (youth make plans, identifiable planning strategies used, youth encouraged to set project/program-related goals)
- **Choice** (open ended content choice, open ended process choice)
- **Reflection** (youth provided intentional opportunities for reflection, use multiple reflection strategies, youth provided structured opportunities to give feedback)

If _____ is present, youth can learn _____ .
(Engagement indicator) *(SEL skill)*

Quality Improvement Goals To Support SEL

What strategies could staff use to build on the quality learning environment to more intentionally support social and emotional skill development?

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____